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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"**

## Statement submitted by Femmes Solidaires, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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## Statement

[Original: French]

Femmes solidaires is a secular, feminist popular education movement. Our network of 10,000 women working in 190 branches and committees throughout France experience very different life situations. Women and girls benefit from social protection throughout their lives: in education, employment (or seeking employment), housing, health care, pensions, family support and emergency response. It is financed through taxes and contributions.

The social protection system, developed after the Second World War to provide assistance to the poorest, in a spirit of citizen solidarity, is now being questioned by one element of the political class, which sees it as too expensive and ineffective.

The major problem in France is still that of real access to these services, due to a territorial inequality that we find in all branches of social protection: services are increasingly concentrated around large cities, effectively excluding rural and disadvantaged women.

### 1. Education

Schooling in France is free and compulsory from the ages of 6 to 16 years, but for the great majority it begins at 3 years of age, when children enter nursery school. While the last two governments made a commitment to provide access to nursery school from the age of 2 years, real access to these services is highly unequal: on average, 11.5 per cent of children under 3 have access to nursery school, but that rate falls to 2.8 per cent in the Department of Seine-Saint-Denis. That is not insignificant, as 30 per cent of all inhabitants of Seine-Saint-Denis live below the poverty line. Day-care facilities are expensive and inaccessible for single mothers, rural women and those looking for work; this tends to perpetuate their precarious situation.

Access to schooling beyond kindergarten remains a major problem for children with disabilities and Roma children. In 2016, fifty per cent of children with disabilities attended regular schools. At the same time, fifty per cent of Roma children are unable to attend school. For girls, after primary school, the discrepancy is getting worse: 90 per cent of teenage Roma girls in France are not in school.

### 2. Housing

In France, 38 per cent of homeless persons are women. At the most conservative estimate, at least one in every three homeless women is a victim of street violence. Access to basic hygiene (showers, sanitary products) remains difficult for homeless women, and they cannot get off the street without access to housing. Affordable accommodation can be provided nationwide through social housing. In 2017, Emmanuelle Cosse, the Minister of Housing, and Laurence Rossignol, the Minister of Women's Rights, co-signed a circular on priority status for women victims of violence, as soon as the filing of a complaint has been recorded, in access to social housing.

There is still much regional inequality in the availability of emergency shelters for women victims of violence. The "115" national emergency shelter network is always overwhelmed: 57 per cent of calls go unanswered, and in 80 per cent of cases "115" can only offer a single night's accommodation. Women victims of violence, with their child(ren), also end up on the street. In fact, emergency accommodation for women victims of violence is provided through local networks: in greater Ajaccio,

Corsica, 30 to 50 women victims of violence each year receive support from the Fédération Association Laïque Éducation Permanente alone.

## 3. Health

On 19 October 2018, a decision was made to close the maternity clinic at Le Blanc, Indre, so the Châteauroux maternity clinic is now the only one in the whole department. Women will have to travel 60 kilometres to give birth: as a result, those who are single, disadvantaged or in need of urgent care will be denied access to a hospital. Many maternity clinics are closing in rural or semi-rural areas, such as Eure, the Valenciennes region and Picardy.

While our social protection system provides coverage for everyone, access to the health care system in France depends greatly on one's place of residence. In the departments of Ain, Jura, Yonne, Eure, Nièvre, Mayenne and Creuse there is not a single gynaecologist.

## 4. Pension scheme

The pension scheme is funded by contributions deducted from the wages of working people. The pension calculation is based on the amount of the wages: the lower the person's wages, the lower their pension will be. Women are disproportionately affected by that formula: 62 per cent of disadvantaged women have experienced long-term unemployment, and 30 per cent of women work part-time. The wages of farm women or those working in a family business are underreported or not reported at all. Upon retirement, single and disadvantaged women experience a precipitous drop in their standard of living: 75 per cent of those persons receiving the lowest pensions are women (2013 figures). In 2018, 66 per cent of persons aged 53 to 69 years having neither a job nor a pension are women.

## 5. Outlook

The need for social protection in France must be reaffirmed and defended. Homeless, rural, single or disadvantaged women who need government assistance are still too often excluded from the social protection system. Poverty and isolation spur populism and permanently impair the health and quality of life of the women affected. According to the principle of equal rights for all citizens, women's rights must apply equally nationwide.